

## STUDENT GOALS: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses about research insights into student academic goals. Cognitive psychologists have found that effective goal setting procedures involve establishing specific and challenging learning objectives. Students who set difficult goals must be persistent while facing the risk of potential failure that could diminish their intrinsic motivation. Teachers can integrate class goal oriented activities into their curriculum plans that cultivate student motivation to reach their goals while working with external expectations. The discussion highlights several instructor mistakes in their classroom teaching practices. Emphasis is placed on teaching strategies that encourage student learning and improve their ability to achieve intellectual goals.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Cognitive Psychology Research**

Psychologists have studied the cognitive aspects of goal setting to better understand what helps or hinders people when pursuing long-term goals. Pioneers in motivational theory focused on how people developed an ideal mental representation of a future state involving personal behavior, environmental setting and specific events. Goals arise after comparing the individual's present state to their perceived ideal one. Experiencing this incongruity creates the motivation and energy to develop plans that offers guidance to reach their ideal state (Reeve, 2005).

Contemporary writers view goal decision making as being a dynamic process where individuals will modify ineffective plans. Emotion plays a key role because negative feelings are triggered by a slower than expected rate of progress. In fact, people who have made enormous personal sacrifices into reaching a goal (e.g. earning a doctoral degree) will experience times of being anxious, frustrated and despair when their goal remains elusive to them. In contrast, when individuals enjoy a faster than expected progress during their goal oriented activities, they experience a set of positive emotions. People will reflect feelings of hope and joy which is often accompanied with greater zeal while reaching their goals (Reeve, 2005).

Cognitive psychologists consider the incongruity principle, as a basic concept underlying human

motivation. The mismatch between present and ideal state serves as a frame of reference for people who want to make changes that either reduce or remove the challenging discrepancy. For instance, students who are upset about their current grade point average can make goals aimed at achieving higher grades to become academically eligible for a scholarship. The discrepancy awareness operates best when the person has a clear vision of their future ideal state (Reeve, 2005). Teachers can stress the importance of setting long and short term goals by integrating the topic in their class discussions and having students read historical biographies of people who overcame various hardships to reach difficult objectives. The story of Helen Keller is inspirational because she did not allow being blind and deaf to stop her from pursuing her dreams. She earned a college degree and was a prolific writer (AFB, 2007).

Research studies affirm that those who establish goals will usually out-perform those who choose not to set goals. Reeve (2005) relates that "...the type of goal one sets is a key determinant in the extent to which a goal translates into performance gains" (p. 205). An essential feature of effective goals is that they must be difficult and specific to improve achievement. Vague and easy goals will fail to have a positive impact on performance because they lack the contextual elements to energize people for action-oriented planning and effort. Therefore, it is important for individuals to devise specific and challenging goals that energize and focus their efforts.

The more difficult goals require greater persistence, patience and effort which can trigger a variety of responses from individuals who are weighing whether certain goals are worth the personal sacrifice (Maxwell, 1999).

Emotions can play a powerful role in a student's academic career because individuals reflect on past and present performance which can trigger a variety of feelings about their skills and abilities. Those who struggle with taking tests or writing major papers will encounter negative memories about previous school experiences. The intensity of these emotions can be even stronger if they have earned poor grades which over time can foster feelings of being frustrated, angry and a degree of hopelessness about their ability to handle school work. Students who have experienced repeated failure in certain academic subjects (e.g. algebra) can lead to an assortment of avoidance actions such as deliberately missing certain classes or entire school days. Sadly, some educators equate learning with suffering and uphold this flawed perspective by assigning an excessive amount of work to their students. Sadly, this only serves to alienate students from having a love for learning. Pekrun, Maier & Elliot (2006) note that "achievement goal researchers have argued that classroom environments, assessment procedures, and educational interventions should be designed to encourage the adoption of mastery goals" (p. 595).

## Classroom Context

Linnenbrink (2005) examined how changes in the classroom goal context impacted student achievement. The study found that the most effective instructional methodology involved a combination of performance and a hybrid mastery-performance approaches. Teachers should focus on mastery of subject matter while fostering competition between groups and minimizing competition between individuals. Group competition fosters more adaptive patterns of learning, develops social skills to negotiate and interact, and inspires communication, bonding and teamwork. Emphasis is placed on mastery of specific knowledge domains that are clearly communicated to students. Teachers are

challenged to create authentic tasks based on student interests while striving to meet curriculum course objectives. For instance, history lessons on World War II can integrate informative stories (e.g. Ann Frank) that spark a deeper interest into war issues and make learning more meaningful.

Establishing academic goals does carry risks that educators must recognize when working with students who strive to improve their academic performance. Students who implement specific plans will face times of greater anxiety about reaching their objectives while facing the possibility of experiencing failure. Those who endure repeated academic failures will need encouragement to avoid having these negative experiences that undermine their confidence, creative problem solving skills and intrinsic motivation. Students who establish excessively high academic objectives can create expectations to meet a specific standard that exceeds the individual's capabilities. This can create increasing levels of stress as the individual invests more time and energy into an unattainable goal. Specific academic goals (e.g. degree in engineering) which are not achieved can result in negative types of feedback such as feeling distressed over lack of skills, loss of respect among peers and even financial losses for those who are in higher education. Individuals who have been pursuing academic goals under severe external pressure (e.g. parents) have endured a stress induced study environment that can rob people of their passion for learning and interfere with their cognitive development. Academic failure can be one of the most dramatic events in a student's life (Reeve, 2005).

Educators can assist students to cultivate constructive mental perspectives about their school work that fosters a realistic view of grades and achievement (Powers, Koestner & Zuroff, 2007). Self-Determination Theory emphasizes autonomous self-regulation as important for goal attainment. Motivation is most effective when personally generated and freely chosen. Autonomous students are less constrained from the expectations and wishes of others, the demands and financial burdens of education and life, or the socio-economic environmental

influences of today's society. Therefore, students will take personal ownership of their learning by formulating meaningful goals. A primary goal of education is promoting self-directed learners who grow more independent during the educational process. Students who are autonomous will have a greater focus on their own personal plans and dreams and less on the expectations of others. This promotes a single mindedness in their pursuit of goals.

In contrast, the self-critic often operates by controlled motivation and struggles with ambivalent feelings due to an intense combination of external or internal achievement pressures. Self-criticism embodies a negative form of self-regulation guided by guilt and fear of reproach (Ryan, 1995). The self-critic is frequently more concerned with societal perceptions and pressures and is less motivated by their own personal desires, interests or passions. This leads to poor adaptation to required school work and lower levels of goal achievement. Students who are driven by guilt or fear of failure are less successful at achieving goals that are externally set for them. Individuals who are more concerned with parental grade expectations and pressures will experience ambivalent feelings about their goals. This leads to poor adaptation to required school work and lower levels of goal achievement. Students will tend to reject objectives that appear to lack personal significance or that do not serve as a source of enjoyment (Ryan, 1995).

Autonomous regulation is a necessary trait for the successful student. One must be able to evaluate their own performance and have some sense of where they need to make adjustments or changes in order to better perform in the future. In addition to being able to self-regulate, the most successful students are also able to see the larger picture of goals and ultimate achievements necessary to reach their ideal future state. Self-regulation encompasses the ability to form a framework of goals leading up to an ultimate goal, the ability to evaluate and judge one's progress along that goal path, and then the ability to self-regulate to correct counterproductive or negative behaviors and stimulate motivation and other positive behaviors (Reeve, 2005).

Miller and Brickman (2004) discuss the importance of systems of autonomously regulated proximal goals that lead someone to achieve a larger future goal. It is suggested that systems of smaller proximal goals build upon one another to form the foundation for the progress towards and eventual attainment of larger goals that ultimately lead to the ideal future achievement. In other words, students are encouraged to design a path toward achieving their ultimate goal. In this path, there should be systems of small goals and bench marks that lead to larger goals and achievements necessary to accomplish the ultimate future goal. Key in this foundation and system of goals is the instrumental link between the future goal and the proximal goals. Students need to be committed and invested in proximal goals in addition to the future goals, and it is important for them to recognize the connection between the two. The concept of self-regulation and proximal goals urges students to think deeper and recognize the sublayers of proximal goals that will be necessary to achieve the ultimate goal. This deeper understanding of what is necessary to achieve the ultimate goal can be quite dynamic. Individuals who are driven by a sense of purpose to reach difficult goals can even inspire and motivate other students.

## Best Teaching Practices

Teachers can create goal oriented activities (e.g. personal shield or banner) that enable students to take personal ownership of their future goals. Students can engage in dialogs and share class presentations on selected goals. Integrating goal assignments into the curriculum will help students who have yet to fully identify a major goal and class discussions, and will stimulate thinking about their future aspirations. Students who are contemplating the formulation of long-term goals will need to include those goals that are assigned to them. There are certain predetermined academic goals such as having a B grade point average in graduate school. Individuals must meet this required performance standard unless they decide not to participate in the degree program. Reeve (2005) highlights four factors that influence an individual in their acceptance or rejection of an externally established goal:



- perceived difficulty of imposed goal
- participants in the goal setting process
- credibility of the person assigning the goal
- extrinsic incentives (p.209).

The students who are assigned to academic goals in higher education will reflect on these four factors in a variety of ways. Students who have parents that expect all A's in their course work might reject that set of expectations while working hard to earn B grades which is considered a more realistic objective. Secondly, parents who expect their children to pursue a certain academic degree program will often undermine intrinsic motivation. Adult learners have more reasons to reject externally imposed goals that lack their interpersonal participation in the goal setting process. Individuals are more likely to accept an assigned goal if others have listened to their perspectives and provided clear rationale for the objective. A third factor is the credibility of the person assigning the goals. If the individual demonstrates behavior and attitudes that are manipulative and authoritarian, then the acceptance of any major goals can be more problematic. In contrast, the credible leader or colleague will foster greater acceptance of assigned goals due to being more trustworthy, supportive and visionary. Incentives play a vital role in accepting goals. Individuals who believe in incentives and benefits (e.g. money or public recognition) are expected with achieving a set of goals with less regard toward difficulty and the credibility of those assigning the objectives. Cognitive psychologists maintain that goal acceptance is usually the highest when: people establish their own goals or are able to negotiate, the goals which are moderately difficult, a credible person assigns the goals and there is a sense of hope to derive personal benefits (Reeve, 2005).

Enhancing student performance requires instructors to share accurate and timely feedback on their work. Reeve (2005) observes that "without feedback, performance can be emotionally unimportant and uninvolved" (p. 207). Teachers who use specific standards to measure performance are providing essential information for

students to understand the quality of their work. The use of rubrics is one way to help to promote effective evaluation procedures that reduce subjective grading and give students relevant information for measuring their academic progress. Huba & Freed (2000) have outlined five key elements for creating a rubric:

- levels of mastery: Achievement is described according to the terms such as excellent, good, needs improvement and unacceptable.
- dimensions of quality: Assessment can address a variety of intellectual or knowledge competencies that target a specific academic discipline or involve multiple disciplines.
- organizational groupings: Students are assessed for multidimensional skills such as teamwork that involves problem solving techniques and various aspects of group dynamics.
- commentaries: This element of the rubric provides a detailed description of the defining features that should be found in the work. The instructor creates the categories that are considered as being excellent, sophisticated or exemplary.
- descriptions of consequences: This is a unique rubric feature that offers students insight into various lessons of their work in a real life setting (e.g. Professionalism).

Goal framing research highlights the importance of teachers providing the guidance and classroom settings that encourage student autonomy in establishing academic goals. Instructors should devote time for understanding the student's perspective, and to better understand their motivations for learning the subject matter. Cognitive psychologists recommend that whenever possible, it is wise to design projects that enable students to cultivate self-directed behaviors that enhance their decision making skills. For instance, providing opportunities for students to select several possible ways to complete an assignment. In sharp contrast to this educational approach, teachers, who tend to pressure students to learn, have several negative techniques. Instructors who have a tendency to be quite controlling will

reinforce this philosophy through various practices such as creating a grading system that relies heavily upon fear of failure. This approach places a strong emotional burden on students and hinders their ability to take personal ownership of their learning. Additionally, instructors who use manipulative techniques to control the teaching and learning process through guilt or shame will interfere with the student's ability to enjoy learning in a meaningful way. Ultimately, teachers who embrace a controlling educational philosophy will hinder the development of skills and attitudes essential to fostering persistence for completing difficult and long-term learning projects (Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006).

Teachers can promote goal setting and higher levels of achievement by enabling students to embrace new challenges, take new risks and help them to believe in their own success. There are several practical ways that the instructors can use to encourage students in being more effective in reaching their academic goals. Teachers should help students to learn new material in small amounts and establish both short and long term goals. Students need time to process the information and rushing through material can lead to individuals feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. Students should be given guided practice that cultivates self-directed learning skills. Individuals need time to organize and review information and correct errors in their understanding. Radar (2005) suggests that students need to develop a sense of accomplishment and autonomy. In order to foster these learning objectives, teachers should provide ample opportunities for students to experience success. Cultivating good study habits is a positive way to build confidence as students learn the importance of having clearly defined academic priorities while developing effective time management strategies. Students should be challenged to focus on a specific study habit (e.g. reading assignments) and seek mastery over this objective. As students master specific objectives, they acquire the confidence to strive for new goals. Teachers can monitor student progress through a variety of methods such as quizzes and asking questions during class discussions. Additional practice sessions are

necessary for achieving mastery of important concepts and increasing student opportunities to experience success. Rosenshine (2002, p. 10) highlights these four best practices that enhance student learning:

- teaching in 'small steps,'
- guiding student practice,
- ensuring a high student success rate, and
- providing extensive practice.

Instructor assessment procedures can be effective motivational tools to share information for personal improvement, affirm creative ideas and help to keep the focus on self-improvement. Beghetto (2005) recommends that "...teachers should point out features of the task that are interesting to students, help students to set challenging but realistic goals, and help students find personal meaning in the task (e.g. provide some level of choice of how students complete the task" (p. 261). Radar (2005) encourages teachers to have a clear sense of their own goals and the rationale behind them. Teachers should devote time explaining the importance of their assignments beyond earning a grade. This will give direction and meaning to the classroom instruction and foster an understanding of goal commitment and achievement. Students appreciate working in an open learning environment that places value on their ideas and perspectives. According to Dinham (2007), teachers should emphasize the role of leadership in education and exhibit positive qualities such as being warm, receptive, responsive and demanding. Students will be given a vision of the importance of people having skills and goals such as those associated with maintaining strong professional relationships.

Researchers have found that those who reflect a high degree of hope in attitudinal surveys have the persistence to overcome intellectual difficulties in their studies. High-hope individuals are not distracted by negative thoughts and creatively approach problems from a multiple of perspectives. Reeve (2005) observes that these individuals "have reservoirs of internally-generated determination ('I will get this done'; 'Keep going!'). See more meaning in their lives as they reflect back on their

lifelong progress in constructing and attaining valued goals" (p. 255). Hopeful attitudes generate positive expectations for achieving goals involving future jobs, relationships, spirituality and university grades (Bruning et al, 2004).

Maxwell & Parrot (2005, p. 57) share six ways to encourage people with their dreams and goals:

- Ask them to share their dreams with you. Everyone has a dream, but few people are asked about it.
- Affirm the person as well as the dream. Let the person know that you not only value his or her dream but that you recognize traits in that individual that can help him or her to achieve it.
- Ask about the challenges they must overcome to reach their dream. Few people ask others about their dreams; even fewer try to find out what kinds of hurdles the person is up against to pursue them.
- Offer your assistance. No one achieves a worthwhile dream alone. You'll be amazed by how people light up when you offer to help them achieve their dream.
- Revisit their dream with them on a consistent basis. If you really want to help others with their dreams, don't make it a one-time activity you mark off your list. Check in with them to see how they're doing and to lend assistance.
- Determine daily to be a dream booster, not a dream buster. Everyone has a dream, and everyone needs encouragement. Set your mental radar to pick up on others' dreams and help them along.

## Conclusion

Teachers can create instructional activities that encourage students in their pursuit of their dreams and goals. Cognitive psychologists continue to investigate what are the most effective ways to increase student motivation and persistence for attaining academic goals. Teachers play a vital role in helping students in developing the cognitive skills, knowledge and attitudes that are essential in achieving challenging intellectual

endeavors.

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined." Henry David Thoreau

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